

Female Criminals and Victims Portrayed by the Japanese Media

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Summary

This research examines how women have been described in recent crime reports in Japan, and raises questions from a gender perspective.

In Japan, crime coverage of both female victims and suspects tends to emphasize information unrelated to the actual crimes, including appearance, sexuality and the sexual background of the victim/suspect. For example, it is common for victims to be asked if they may have been at some fault, and their appearance may be mentioned. Suspects may be questioned about motherhood and their sexual relationships. This indicates that crime news is colored by gender bias, in addition to the existing problems associated with crime reports, such as the violation of privacy and the resulting report damage.

The author has pointed out that there are many problems with how women are described even in the present day when the mass media tends to pay more attention to human rights. For instance, we often see cases of news reporting that make us wonder if the female victims might have been at fault, even if this is more suggested than actually stated. There is also the damage caused by the dissemination of information on the Internet by the mass media.

Against this background, this study selected crime reports involving women (female victims or suspects) mainly from newspaper coverage of the past five years. We analyzed the details of the coverage: (1) to clarify the characteristics of reporting in recent years; and (2) to examine the factors revealed. Furthermore, we examined how social trends such as the growing popularity of the Internet and the introduction of the lay judge system have affected this subject, and how they impact women's issues in crime coverage.

In the case of female victims, while we can say that reports on personal information have decreased compared with those of 20 years ago, as has the harm caused by privacy leakage, there are more than a few expressions suggesting that victims of sexual crimes may have been at fault, which means that gender bias still exists in the news reports. With respect to female suspects, the situation has not changed at all when compared with that of 20 years ago. In other words personal information is more heavily reported on female suspects, and there are many negative references to gender norms, including matters unrelated to the crime. There are also more cases where the full background of the incidents are covered in depth.

On the other hand, crime reports in newspapers since the introduction of the lay

judge system have included simplified explanations of the crime or extremely detailed information regarding only the main points of the trial. This is ostensibly done to make it easy for the public to understand. We examined the relationship between this point and gender bias.

In the modern era, the mass media forms an integral part of our perceived reality and our awareness of norms. Coverage colored by gender bias not only hurts those who are covered but also enforces gender norms among society as a whole. In this context, we believe that studying the current situation of how women are described in crime reports from the perspective of gender is useful for identifying the damage caused to the subjects of the reports, and for obtaining ideas for improvement. It is hoped that the results and the implications of the present study will lead to a clearer conception of how to report without gender bias.

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